

C L I O:

OR, A

DISCOURSE ON TASTE.





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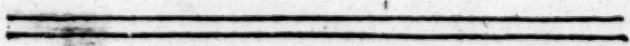
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D I S C O U R S E

O N

T A S T E.

ADDRESSED TO A YOUNG LADY.



L O N D O N:

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# C L I O :

OR, A

## DISCOURSE on TASTE.

MADAM,

**W**HEN I had the honour of drinking tea with you a few days ago, and occasionally read to you Rollin's General Reflections upon what is called Good Taste, some observations you made brought on a very lively and pleasing conversation, in which you opened so many new prospects to me upon our subject, that I had thoughts of reducing my ideas to writing while they continued fresh in my memory, and you were pleased to approve of that design. Rollin, you observed, wrote for young students, and his

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principal view was to form a taste for literature. You very gracefully, but in a manner I did not then perceive, led me to that taste and elegance which distinguishes persons politely educated, and particularly to the graces of your own sex: the transition indeed, from the beauties of writing to the elegance and propriety displayed in polished life, was not great; for the same simple original principles of taste are common to both, and are varied only according to characters and their situations. It is a happy circumstance in my favour, that the subject itself, and your approbation of my attempt, confine my thoughts to you; I have no necessity, madam, of invoking a muse to inspire me.

The taste we spoke of may be defined, at large, a clear sense of the noble, the beautiful, and the affecting, through nature

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ture and art. It distinguishes and selects, with unerring judgment, what is fine and graceful from the mean and disgusting ; and keeping a strict and attentive eye on nature, never neglects her but when nature herself is in disgrace.

All our species that are perfect bring the first principles of taste with them into the world. Rollin produces instances of universal taste in music and painting : “ A concert, says he, that has all its parts well composed and well executed, both as to instruments and voices, pleases universally : but if any discord arises, any ill tone of voice be intermixed, it shall displease even those who are absolutely ignorant of music. They know not what it is that offends them, but they find somewhat grating in it to their ears ; and this proceeds from the taste and sense of harmony implanted in them by nature. In



like manner a fine picture charms and transports a spectator who has no idea of painting. Ask him what pleases him, and why it pleases him, and he cannot easily give an account, or specify the real reason ; but natural sentiment works almost the same effect in him as art and use in perfect judges."

Here you stopped me with a very subtle and confounding objection, which became much stronger by your familiar and sprightly manner of supporting it : though I did not then make a good figure in opposition to you, yet now I can venture upon paper to enforce the principle I defended. Your objection was, That whatever pleases people forms to them a true and agreeable taste ; and that therefore there is no such thing as universal taste in the beautiful, the sublime, and the affecting ; for that which pleases one  
person



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person is displeasing to another : who then can pretend to judge between mankind, since no sentence pronounced in this case can alter the tastes of men, or make that agreeable to a person which disgusts him, or the contrary ? Though this objection be certainly new from you, who have yet no acquaintance with books that treat on the nature of the human mind ; yet it has often been made very triumphantly by writers of the greatest reputation, and seems to require a more satisfactory solution than has hitherto appeared.

In order to answer it, give me leave to distinguish between those things whose propriety and taste depend merely on the mode, and those others in which there is a real and original beauty testified by the voice of nature, if there really be any such. You will readily observe, that the difference between particular

fashions of dress, ceremonies, furniture, and many other things, depends upon mode or habit : an elderly lady likes a dress she wore in her youth, not because it is really more becoming than the present fashion, but because that dress bears an intimate relation to her days of joy, and brings them back to her imagination. In a thousand partialities there is not so good a foundation for our preference, and our choice often is but slightly divided from caprice and whim : perhaps a person who was pleasing to us had such a set of china, or a person we did not like, happened to wear or praise such a gown. When once we express a liking or aversion, so as to fix it on the memory, it remains with us, because it has been *ours* perhaps long after we can recollect the first cause. It cannot be doubted, madam, in all those things in which nature has given us no standard, you argue exactly right.

But

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But are there any instances, and what are they, in which nature has formed an universal standard of judgment in our minds? for, as you rightly observe, it does not signify that things appear beautiful to you or me, or to ten thousand beside; if there be any one person who has not the same taste from nature, they are not beautiful to him. I am, for my part, persuaded that there is, in several respects, an universal standard of taste in the soul of man, which, it is true, may be depraved or corrupted by education and habit, though it can never be wholly rooted out or stifled.

To proceed to particular instances of this natural sense: Every man who is not an idiot has a taste for truth; the most notorious liar on earth, when taken in a falsehood which he hopes to evade, shall

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convince

convince you of his own private unalterable sense by his palliations and excuses.

The same thing may be said of gratitude ; and though the virtue itself be rare, yet no one ever in earnest acknowledged himself to be ungrateful, or would willingly bear that imputation ; which is sufficient evidence that the approbation of the virtue is universal.

The applause we yield to generosity, and our contempt of a very selfish disposition, is not less general, though there seem to be some objections. Misers have been known to praise as well as practise the most sordid parsimony, and to condemn generosity ; but I believe, upon considering this matter closely, it will appear that misers, as well as others, have a sense of the merit of generosity ; and  
find

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 9

find fault with it in others only where it affects nearly or remotely their own interests, or becomes a reproach to them : they condemn liberality where it appears to them to lavish beyond proper limits. The miser admits the virtue equally with the generous, but his fears and suspicions of future want make him confine it within a small compass : he parts with his farthing where a more generous person bestows a shilling or a guinea ; yet this farthing extorted from him, is an indubitable proof that he has a fixed sense of liberality, though it be restrained by some mean and selfish considerations.

Liberty is pleasing, and confinement disgustful to every body. You can walk and breathe freely under a low cieling, what then makes you prefer a loftier chamber ? What makes you, if the weather permit, like the open air best, and  
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chuse to be bounded only by the horizon, that extends in prospect as far as the eye can reach?

Novelty also hath its charms in a thousand instances, that wear away by familiarity.

All ages and nations have agreed to admire true wit ; it is certain that witticism, pun, mimickry, and buffoonery, have very often supplied the place of it with applause ; but when we consider, that all people who make use of false wit, notwithstanding admire the true and approve of it ; that they put off the false wit always under some resemblance or appearance of real wit ; and that those who like it are imposed upon just as men are who take counterfeit coin, because it has the same impression with good money ; and when we further observe, that those very  
people



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. II

people who use false wit, as they improve in their taste and sense despise the false and adopt the true; and that nothing fixes them in a habit of punning and buffoonery, but an incurable stupidity, and an inability to act a higher part; we shall be obliged to confess, that true wit hath its boundaries and marks which for ever distinguish it.

I shall probably be obliged to say something of our sense of personal beauty hereafter; I shall here content myself with making the following observation: A perfect beauty always holds the superiority in the esteem of every one over remarkable deformity. It is only when the degrees from deformity to beauty approach each other, or when beauties of different kinds are compared who hold nearly the same degree, that we are confused and differ in opinion. The same  
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confusion happens in our taste of sweet and bitter ; if the sweets approach each other, we cannot readily determine : but as beauty is composed of various principles, and is more complicated, we are proportionably in greater confusion in our comparisons when the variations are not very remarkable.

Grandeur of thought, or grandeur of objects, strike us irresistibly with surprize and delight. The Grecian and Roman histories abound with splendid instances of greatness of soul ; but I have no need to take you from your favourite poet Homer on this head, whose Iliad is a continued series of elevating sentiments, and of sublime images that force our admiration. Visible objects of grandeur have a similar effect : a large river that throws itself down a precipice with unceasing violence and thunder, never fails to raise a pleasing astonish-

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astonishment in the beholders. A summer's evening sky cast over with lofty and irregular clouds, dipped in purple and gold, the ocean in storms, and a broken prospect of rocks and mountains irregularly piled, affect the mind in the same manner.

However certain what I have been just saying, may be, let us stop here, and suppose that I have been entirely mistaken; let us suppose that there are some men created without those original tastes, or having the very opposite; that there are men who have a natural taste and approbation of falsehood and ingratitude; who think a mean and sordid disposition to be meritorious; and who disesteem grandeur and generosity of soul: do you not observe, that you suppose them, by their very natures and dispositions, the most contemptible, and debased animals on earth?

earth? Who, say you, shall judge in this case, between such persons and ourselves, since they have their beauty and their taste, as well as we; and the difference is, that they judge things to be agreeable, which we judge to be the contrary. But is it not evident, madam, by the very light of sentiment, that it is not upon the judgment, or opinions, concerning them, that the merit of truth, gratitude, and generosity depend; but that they have a real value and worth in themselves, which opinion cannot alter; and that falsehood, ingratitude, and a sordid, mean temper, have a natural baseness, that opinion cannot ennoble. I know no reason for our perception of absolute eternal beauty in the virtues I have mentioned, but by supposing that the Father of being, who is eternal truth and goodness, and the original standard of grandeur and beauty, has stamped on our minds a sense of those absolute

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solute and eternal perfections. If opinion were the real standard of sentiment, the nature of one animal could not be more noble than that of any other; yet it is certain, that if there was in the world but one man of integrity, generosity, gratitude, and a great soul, and all the rest of mankind consisted of people who had no sense of the dignity of truth, and a noble disposition, this single person would be of more worth than the whole race of man beside.

Having pointed out natural universal taste in several different prospects, and consequently proved, that there is such a thing in the human breast, let us proceed to a more intimate acquaintance with it.

Good taste, like the morning beam, paints in their different colours all the objects of our view, and informs us of whatever is beautiful and engaging. It  
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is the inward light of universal beauty. In Greece, where it first shone, poetry, architecture, painting, sculpture, and music, sprung up together, the beautiful children of one birth. At that same time the men were remarkable for elevated sentiments, and the women for that elegance which gives its last lustre to beauty. The same revolution happened in Rome ; and now again the sciences revive in concert in Europe, and elegance awakes with the arts. In the ages of ignorance they all languished, and fell together. The heavy, confused, and gross ornaments of the old Gothick buildings, placed without elegance or proportion (says Rollin) were the images of the writings of the same age.

From the uniformity of the effects, it is evident, that the principles of taste are simple and invariable. It is the same light, but the colours differ according to  
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## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 17

the object it falls on. The grace of every elegant person has something peculiar, but the elegance itself is the same lustre, only varied in its shades by the character and disposition of the person it beautifies. A conformity of taste also will be found in the most different productions of genius. Music inspires us like a glowing description; the statue and picture breathe the fire and passion of poetry; and you will discover the same stile and image of grandeur in Corregio that you see in Homer.

True taste discovers with delight, and pursues nature with a faithful passion. The graceful and the becoming are never found separated from nature and propriety. When we came to this observation in Rollin, you made an objection, that obliged me, in order to answer

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it,

it, to make some reflections, which led me to approach nearer the origin of elegance than I expected. Your objection madam, was this: "If elegance be inseparable from propriety and nature, why are not the common people, who are without education, just as nature made them, the most graceful? and why does elegance reside only amongst those who are formed by art?" I could not pass over this ingenious question without an answer, and it led me to the following observations.

In the present situation of the world, the necessaries and comforts of life are procured by vast labour and hardships, which fall to the lot of the common herd of mankind in all countries; and labour requires harsh, forced, and violent motions, which therefore, along with the labour

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labour, become habitual to the crowd. As this race of men walk not for pleasure, but to perform journeys, or to remove where their occasions call them, they take the advantage of bending the body forward, and of aiding the motion by a sling as they walk. Their low station, their wants and employments, give them a sordidness and ungenerosity of disposition, together with a coarseness and nakedness of expression; from whence it happens, that their motions and address are equally rude and ungraceful. But you will please to observe, that this unseemly and dishonoured state of man, though it be in one sense natural, that is, it is the effect of the natural state of the earth and of the seasons; yet that it befall man on that fatal day which condemned him to labour, to want, and misery; when the earth was laid waste, and ordered to produce only to the in-

dustrious husbandman ; and that the real nature of man, when the reins are thrown loose, takes a loftier flight. Observe the few in a higher station, who by their fortunes are disengaged from wretchedness and poverty, and who are at liberty to follow the bent of the human genius. You see their taste soon distinguish them from the crowd, and assume a more elevated character. They discover a thousand beauties in the creation which the vulgar know nothing of, and elegance and decency make their appearance in the human state.

It is observable then, that abject meanness and rudeness are the issue of hardship and want, but not of the human disposition or frame of mind ; on the contrary, the moment man is released from the violence and misery that oppress him,  
that

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 21

that his real nature takes the lead, and his taste assumes its honest right, it covers him with decent elegance; it gives him a dignity worthy of the sovereign of earth, air, and waters; it wraps him in the golden visions of poetry and music, and charms him with the new ideas of beauty and grandeur. Though this latter be a state of improvement, yet we feel plainly, that it is an improvement to which the soul itself tends when its fetters are cast off; and that taste is like a guide, who having found us a-stray upon a barren heath, leads us home to nature and propriety, where a thousand domestic beauties attend us.

Elegance, the most undoubted offspring and visible image of fine taste, the moment it appears, is universally admired: men disagree about the other



constituent parts of beauty, but they all unite without hesitation to acknowledge the power of elegance.

The general opinion is, that this most conspicuous part of beauty, that is perceived and acknowledged by every body, is yet utterly inexplicable, and retires from our search when we would discover what it is. Where shall I find the secret retreat of the graces, to explain to me the elegance they dictate, and to paint in visible colours the fugitive and varying enchantment that hovers round a graceful person, yet leaves us for ever in agreeable suspense and confusion? I need not seek for them, madam; the graces are but emblems of the human mind, in its loveliest appearances; and while I write for you, it is impossible not to feel their influence.

Personal



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 23

Personal Elegance, for that is the object of our present enquiry, may be defined the image and reflection of the grandeur and beauty of the invisible soul. Grandeur and beauty in the soul itself, are not objects of sense ; colours cannot paint them, but they diffuse inexpressible loveliness over the person.

When two or more passions or sentiments unite, they are not so readily distinguished, as if they had appeared separate ; however, it is easy to observe, that the complacency and admiration we feel in the presence of elegant persons, is made up of respect and affection ; and that we are disappointed when we see such persons act a base or indecent part. These symptoms plainly shew, that personal elegance appears to us to be the image and reflection of an elevated and beautiful mind. In some characters, the grandeur

deur of soul is predominant; in whom beauty is majestick and awful. In this stile is miss F——. In other characters, a soft and attracting grace is more conspicuous: this latter kind is more pleasing, for an obvious reason. But elegance cannot exist in either alone, without a mixture of the other; for majesty without the beautiful would be haughty and disgusting; and easy accessible beauty without decorum would lose the idea of elegance, and become an object of contempt.

You may ask me, why the grandeur and beauty of the soul charm universally? They charm universally, but from very different causes. Elevation of soul, as I before observed, seems wholly buried and oppressed under wretchedness, in the unimproved state of man, while he is struggling with want and misery; but  
when

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 25

when he disengages himself, and the elevation of the human genius appears openly, we view with secret joy, and delightful amazement, the sure evidence and pledge of our dignity : the mind catches fire by a train that lies within itself, and expands with conscious pride and merit, like a generous youth over the images of his country's heroes. But the beautiful and engaging character is made up of complacency, good-nature, and the other gentle passions which give an easy attracting delight, and win our affections by yielding us a flattering superiority.

Personal elegance or grace is a fugitive lustre, that never settles in any part of the body ; you see it glance and disappear in the features and motions of a graceful person ; it strikes your view ; it shines like an exhalation ; but the moment you follow it, the wandering flame

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vanishes, and immediately lights up in something else : you may as well think of fixing the pleasing delusion of your dreams, or the colours of a dissolving rainbow.

You have arisen early at times, in the summer season, to take the advantage of the cool of the morning, to ride abroad. Let us suppose you have mistaken an hour or two, and just got out a few minutes before the rising of the sun. You see the fields and woods, that lay the night before in obscurity, attiring themselves in beauty and verdure ; you see a profusion of brilliants shining in the dew ; you see the stream admitting the light into its pure bosom ; and you hear the birds, who are awakened by a rapture that comes upon them from the morning. If the eastern sky be clear, you see it glow with the promise of a flame that has not yet

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 27

yet appeared ; and if it be overcast with clouds, you see those clouds stained by a bright red, bordered with gold or silver, that by the changes appear volatile, and ready to vanish. How various and beautiful are those appearances, which are not the sun, but the distant effects of it over different objects ! In like manner the soul flings inexpressible charms over the human person and actions ; but then the cause is less known, because the soul for ever shines behind a cloud, and is always retired from our senses.

You conceive why elegance is of a fugitive nature, and exists chiefly in motion : as it is communicated by the principle of action that governs the whole person, it is found over the whole body, and is fixed no where. The curious eye with eagerness pursues the wandering beauty, which it sees with surprize at every



every turn, but is never able to overtake. It is a waving flame, that like the reflection of the sun from water never settles ; it glances on you in every motion and disposition of the body ; its different powers through attitude and motion seem to be collected in dancing, wherein it plays over the arms, the legs, the breast, the neck, and in short the whole frame : but if grace has any fixed throne, it is in the face, the residence of the soul, where you think a thousand times it is just issuing into view.

Elegance assumes to itself an empire equal to that of the soul ; it rules and inspires every part of the body, and makes use of all the human powers ; but it particularly takes the passions under its charge and direction, and turns them into a kind of artillery, with which it does infinite execution.

The

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE 29

The passions that are favourites with the graces are modesty, goodnature, particularly when it is heightened by a small colouring of affection into *sweetness*, and that fine languor which seems to be formed of a mixture of still joy and hope. Surprise, shame, and even grief and anger have appeared pleasing under proper restrictions ; for it must be observed, that all excess is shocking and disagreeable, and that even the most pleasing passions appear to most advantage when the tincture they cast over the countenance is enfeebled and gentle. The passions that are enemies to the graces are impudence, affectation, strong and harsh degrees of pride, malice, and austerity.

There is an union of the fine passions, but so delicate that you cannot conceive any one of them separate from the rest, called *sensibility*, which is requisite in an  
1 elegant

elegant deportment ; it chiefly resides in the eye, which is indeed the seat of the passions.

I have spoken of the passions only as they are subservient to grace, which is the object of our present attention. The face is the mother-country, if I may call it so, or the habitation of grace ; and it visits the other parts of the body only as distant provinces, with some little partiality to the neck, and the fine basis that supports it ; but the countenance is the very palace in which it takes up its residence ; it is there it revels through its various apartments ; you see it wrapped in clouded majesty upon the brow ; you discover it about the lips hardly rising to a smile, and vanishing in a moment, when it is rather perceived than seen ; and then, by the most engaging vicissitudes, it enlivens, dissolves, and flames in the eye.

You

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 31

You have, I suppose, all along observed, that I am not treating of beauty, which depends on a variety of principles, but of that elegance which is the effect of a delicate and awakened taste, and in every kind of form is the enchantment that attracts and pleases universally, even without the assistance of any other charm; whereas without it no degree of beauty is charming. You have undoubtedly seen women lovely without much beauty, and handsome without being lovely; it is gracefulness causes this variation, and throws a lustre over disagreeable features, as the sun paints a showery cloud with the colours of the rainbow.

I before remarked, that the grace of every elegant person is varied agreeable to the character and disposition of the person it beautifies; I am sensible you readily conceive the reason. Elegance is the natural habit and image of the soul beam-

ing forth in action; it must therefore correspond with the peculiar features, air, and disposition of the person; it must arise from nature, and flow with ease, and a propriety that distinguishes it. The imitation of any particular person, however graceful, is dangerous, lest the affectation appear; but the unstudied elegance of nature is acquired by the example and conversation of several elegant persons of different characters.

It is also because elegance is the reflection of the soul appearing in action, that good statues, and pictures drawn from life, are laid before the eye in motion. If you look at the old Gothic churches built in barbarous ages, you will see the statues reared up dead and inanimate against the walls.

I said, at the beginning of this little discourse, that the beauty of dress results  
from



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 33

from mode or fashion, and it certainly does so in a great measure ; but I must limit that assertion by the following observation, that there is also a real beauty in attire that does not depend on the mode : those robes which leave the whole person at liberty in its motions, and that give to the imagination the natural proportions and symmetry of the body, are always more becoming than such as restrain any part of the body, or in which it is lost or disfigured. You may easily imagine how a pair of stays laced tightly about the Minerva we admired, would oppress the sublime beauty of her comportment and figure. Since persons of rank cannot chuse their own dress, but must run along with the present fashion, the secret of dressing gracefully must consist in the slender variations that cannot be observed to desert the fashion, and yet approach nigher to the complexion and import of the countenance, and that at

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the same time allows to the whole body the greatest possible freedom, ease, and imagery : by imagery I mean, that as a good painter will shew the effect of the muscles that do not appear to the eye, so a person skilful in dress will display the elegance of the form, though it be covered and out of view. As the taste of dress approaches to perfection all art disappears, and it seems the effect of negligence and instinctive inattention : for this reason its beauties arise from the manner and general air rather than from the richness, which last, when it becomes too gross and oppressive, destroys the elegance. A brilliancy and parade in dress is therefore the infallible sign of a bad taste, that in this contraband manner endeavours to make amends for the want of true elegance, and bears a relation to the heaps of ornament that encumbered the Gothic buildings. Apelles observing an Helen painted

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 35

ed by one of his scholars, that was overcharged with a rich dress, "I find, young man, said he, not being able to paint her beautiful, you have made her fine."

Harsh and violent motions are always unbecoming. Milton attributes the same kind of motion to his angels that the Heathens did to their deities, *soft sliding without step*. It is impossible to preserve the attractions in a country-dance that attend on a minuet; as the step quickens, the most delicate of the graces retire. The rule holds universally through all action, whether quick or slow; it should always partake of the same polished and softened motion, particularly in the transitions of the countenance, where the genius of the person seems to hover and reside.

The degrees run very high upon the scale of elegance, and probably few have arrived near the highest pitch ; but it is certain, that the idea of surprising beauty that was familiar in Greece, has been hardly conceived by the moderns : many of their statues remain the objects of our admiration, but wholly superior to imitation ; their pictures that have sunk in the wreck of time, appear in the descriptions made of them to have equal imagination with the statues ; and their poetry abounds with the same cœlestial imagery. But what puts this matter out of doubt is, that their celebrated beauties were the models of their artists ; and it is known, that the elegancies of Thais and Phryne were copied by the famous painters of Greece, and consigned to canvasses and marble to astonish and charm distant ages.

I have



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 37

I have dwelt on personal elegance, because the ideas and principles in this part of good taste are more familiar and natural to you. We may then take them for a foundation, since the same principles of unaffected justness, the same easy grace and simple grandeur will animate our thoughts, and dispose of them in our writings, like the lights and shades of nature, with a careless propriety, and will enlighten our judgments in literature, in sculpture, architecture, and painting.

Fine writing is but an easy picture of nature, as it rises to view upon the imagination. It is the expression of our first thoughts, or at least of what ought to be so ; and we are surprised in the most celebrated writings, to find that they are wholly familiar to us, and seem to be exactly what we ourselves think and would say ; and bad writers seem to have been un-



der some restraint, that put them out of the track that lay so directly before them. Would you not then think, that fine writing should be very common? But I must pray you to recollect, that elegance, though it consists chiefly in propriety and ease, yet is attained by very few. I have already intimated the reason: true taste and sentiment lie deep in the mind; and it requires vast judgment to bring the beauteous ore to light, and to refine it. I should not be impartial and candid, if I had not owned to you that learning, in much the greater part of mankind, distorts the genius as much as laced stays do the body; oppresses the natural seeds of propriety and beauty in the imagination; and renders men ever incapable of writing or even thinking well. When you except a few men of distinguished talents, ladies both write and speak better than scholars. If you ask me the reason of this, I must in-

form

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form you, that the easy and natural excursions of the imagination are seldom checked in ladies ; while the enslaved pupils of colleges and schools in tender youth are forced into aukward imitations, often without being directed by persons of taste, and the mind unmercifully swaddled in prejudices and regular impertinences that distort it for life. The manner of the ancient schools was to learn by such familiar conversations as you have at times engaged in ; by which means, instead of forcing a most nauseous draught of learning upon youth, their genius was charmed forth by curiosity and emulation ; the latent powers of the mind were gently unbound ; and the generous ardor and pleasure that run originally through their enquiries, gave a warmth and natural beauty to their ideas. There is a truth which I would strongly inculcate, and which is intimated through this little discourse ; it

is, that most people have more light, judgment, and genius latent within their breasts by far than they are able to draw forth or employ ; that the utmost skill and address is requisite to tune those fine strings of the soul, if I may call them so, and bring into execution the harmony they are capable of ; and that the perfection of those powers, whatever they be, is the highest degree of improvement to which any person's genius can attain.

Letters of business, of compliment, and friendship, form generally the compass of a lady's writing ; for which, perhaps, the best rule that can be given is to neglect all rules. The same unaffected grace and propriety which animate your actions and conversation, cannot fail to charm universally upon paper : when your stile has taken the familiar turn and easy spirit of your words, and rejected the air of premeditation that steals in upon study, then  
will

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 41

will it be agreeable beyond imagination. Turns of wit and compliment that come without being sought for are very pleasing, but they ought to be such as might pass with grace in conversation.

There are a kind of charms that appear in writing so obvious, and so seemingly easy, that it is matter of surprize how the crowd of modern writers miss of them : I mean, the distinct picturing, the form, and attitude of our ideas, transferred to our descriptions, so as to form landscapes and images upon the imagination. We perceive every object in nature in some determinate form and manner ; whence it is that the mind conceives a lively picture of what the eye beholds : Why should not our words then place objects in the natural perspective as we perceive them ? Great writers always paint their thoughts, and make them ob-  
jects



jects of the imagination. You see Homer's heroes perpetually in action before you ; as you traverse his fields of battle, you every moment change the scene ; when you begin to read him, you find yourself insensibly taken by the hand, and led wherever he has a mind to fix your view. Shakespear's characters have invariably the same propriety and peculiarity , which engages our attention to run along with him even in his absurdities and fictions. Almost every sentence through Milton's poetic works is a picture. This simple and animated expression is the very characteristic of the ancients ; but it is not by any means confined to grave and important subjects : the most familiar ideas are equally capable of the lively air and mien of nature. A flowing easy dress and attitude, and light softened colouring, are as becoming and beautiful over a lady's thoughts in her letters, as  
more



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 43

more studied and laboured painting in the composition of philosophers.

I am going, madam, to dictate to ladies with an air of decision which I have no where else assumed, because the sentiment is yours ; and indeed it may be easily distinguished by the delicacy. You remember the disgust you expressed at the affectation of learning in your own sex : I will venture to unfold your thought, but you must not expect the same grace with which it fell from your lips.

A lady should rather appear to think well than to speak well of books ; she may shew the engaging light that good taste and sensibility always diffuse over conversation ; she may give instances of her sense of great and affecting passages, because they display the fineness of her imagination, or the goodness of her heart ;

heart ; but all criticism beyond this sits as awkwardly upon her as her grandfather's large spectacles. I would by all means have a lady know more than she displays, because it gives her unaffected powers in discourse, for the same reason that a person's efforts are easy and firm, when his action requires not his full strength. She should have an acquaintance with the fine arts, because they enrich and beautify the imagination ; but she should carefully keep them out of view in the shape of learning, and let them run through the easy happy vein of unpremeditated thought : for this reason she should never use nor even understand the terms of art : the gentlemen will occasionally explain them to her. I knew a lady of vast address who when a term of art came to be mentioned, always turned to the gentleman she had a mind to compliment, and with uncommon grace asked him the meaning of it ;  
by

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 45

by this means she gave men the air of superiority they like so well, while she held them in chains. No humour can be more delicate than this, which plays upon the tyrant, who requires an acknowledged superiority of sense as well as power, from the weaker sex.

It is not uncommon to find ladies paint finely in conversation in the careless current of their thoughts ; and, indeed, the vivacity and delicacy of imagination peculiar to your sex, seem to have put this kind of charm peculiarly in your hands. The highest part of the imagery of expression is that which discloses the human sentiments, and gently touches the secret springs and passions of the soul. There is a sensibility that engages the attention even on the most trifling subjects ; but when sensibility concurs with an obliging turn of mind, and an intimate knowledge  
of

of the human heart in the same person, they form the Syren character that sports securely with hearts, and pleases even while it destroys.

A free and easy proportion united with simplicity, seem to constitute the elegance of form in building. A graceful person gives us in the human form, an idea of this beauteous and liberal regularity. In the proportions of a noble edifice, you see the same image of an easy master-hand, which instantly strikes us, though we be hardly able to describe it. The evident uniformity of the rotunda, and its unparalleled simplicity, are probably the sources of its superior beauty. When we look up at the vaulted roof, that seems to rest upon our horizon, we are astonished at the magnificence, more than at the visible extent.

Sculp-



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 47

Sculpture and painting have their standard in nature. The art of the landscape painter lies in selecting those objects of view that are beautiful or great, providing there be a propriety and a just neighbourhood preserved in the assemblage, along with a careless distribution that solicits your eye to a principal object where it rests; in giving such a glance or confused view of those that retire out of prospect, as to raise curiosity, and create in the imagination affecting ideas that do not appear; and in bestowing as much life and action as possible, without overcharging the piece. A landscape is enlivened by putting the animated figures into action; by flinging over it the cheerful aspect which the sun bestows, either by a proper disposition of shade, or by the appearances that beautify his rising or setting; and by a judicious prospect of water, which always conveys the idea of motion: a few dishevelled clouds have the  
same



same effect, but with somewhat less vivacity.

The excellence of portrait-painting and sculpture spring from the same principles that move and affect us in life; they are not the persons who perform at a comedy or tragedy we go to see with so much pleasure, but the passions and emotions they display: in like manner, the value of statues and pictures arise in proportion to the strength and clearness of the expression of the passions; and to the peculiar and distinguishing air of character. But besides the strict propriety of nature, sculpture and figure-painting is a kind of description, which, like poetry, is under the direction of genius; that while it preserves nature, sometimes in a fine flight of fancy, throws an ideal splendor over the figures that never existed in real life. Such is the

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 49

\*the sublime and celestial character that breathes over the Apollò Belvedere, and the inexpressible beauties that dwell upon the Venus of Medici, and seem to shed an illumination around her. This superior beauty must be varied with propriety, as well as the passions ; the elegance of Juno must be decent, lofty, and elated ; of Minerva, masculine, confident, and chaste ; and of Venus, winning, soft, and conscious of pleasing. These sister arts, painting and statuary, as well as poetry, put it out of all doubt, that the imagination carries the ideas of the beautiful and the sublime far beyond visible nature. No mortal ever possessed the blaze of divine charms that surrounds the Apollò Belvedere, or the Venus of Medici, that I have just mentioned.

I shall but lightly touch on the taste of personal beauty : it forever approaches

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to

to fixed determined laws, and yet will not be confined by them. There are no unalterable rules for complexion and form, which affection, and a variation in taste, will not over-rule : we are more fixed in our sense of the passions. Good-nature, complacency, and greatness of soul, are always pleasing. Impudence, malice, contemptuous pride, and stupidity, are always disagreeable. I have already sufficiently spoken of the universal force of personal elegance ; our taste of beauty then is partly determined, and partly changeable. I can now resolve a difficulty that often occurs in our reflections on the taste of beauty : we all speak of beauty as if it were universally known and acknowledged, and yet we find, in fact, that people, in placing their affections, often have very little regard to the common notions of beauty. The truth is, complexion and form being the charms  
that

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE 51

that are visible and conspicuous, the common standard of beauty is generally restrained to those external attractions : but since personal grace and the agreeable passions, although they cannot be delineated, have a more universal and uniform power, it is no wonder people, in resigning their hearts, so often contradict the common received standard. Accordingly, as the engaging passions and the address are discovered in conversation, the attachments of people are generally fixed by an intercourse of sentiment, and seldom by a transient view, except in romances and novels. It is further to be observed, that when once the affections are fixed, a new face with a higher degree of beauty will not always have a higher degree of power to remove them, because our affections arise from a source within ourselves, as well as from external beauty ; and when the tender passion is at-



tached by a particular object, the imagination surrounds that object with a thousand ideal embellishments that exist only in the mind of the lover.

There are few who have not felt the charms of music, and by their sensations acknowledged its expressions to be intelligible to the heart ; and yet we are at a loss when we would discover the powers by which it invests and captivates the soul, or the reasons why the tastes of men should be so various on this head. There are the clearest flashes of light breaking through the deepest obscurity ; a well-known and eloquent language conceived in terms that are not understood. Shall we attempt, from the effects of harmony, to catch some little idea of the unknown powers by which it commands the soul with such absolute authority ?

We



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 53

We feel plainly that music touches and gently agitates the agreeable and sublime passions ; that it wraps us in melancholy, and elevates in joy ; that it dissolves and inflames ; that it melts us in tenderness, and rouses to rage : but its strokes are so fine and delicate, that, like a tragedy, even the passions that are wounded please ; its sorrows are charming, and its rage heroic and delightful ; therefore, as people feel the particular passions with different degrees of force, their taste of harmony must proportionably vary. Music then is a language directed to the passions, and well understood by them ; but the rudest passions lose their nature, and become pleasing in harmony : let me add, also, that it awakens some passions which we perceive not, in ordinary life. The most elevated sensation of music arises from a confused perception of ideal or visionary beauty and rapture, which is sufficiently perceivable to fire the imagi-

nation, but not clear enough to become an object of knowledge. This shadowy beauty the mind attempts, with a languishing curiosity, to collect into a distinct object of view and comprehension ; but it sinks and escapes, like the dissolving ideas of a delightful dream, that are neither within the reach of the memory, nor yet totally fled. The charms of music then, though real and affecting, seem yet too confused and fluid to be collected into a distinct idea. Harmony is often understood by others better than by musicians, who having employed so much time and pains in the mechanic or practical part, learn by habit to value it, and lay a stress on those dexterities that are only the effects of a ready hand, and which have no real value at all, but as they serve to produce those collections of sound that move the passions : musicians, therefore, should take particular care to preserve

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 55

preserve in its full vigour and sensibility their original natural taste, which alone feels and discovers the true beauty of music.

If Milton, Shakespear, or Dryden, had been born with the same genius and inspiration for music as for poetry, and had passed through the practical part without corrupting the natural taste, or blending with it a prepossession in favour of the flights and dexterities of hand, then would their notes be tuned to passions and to sentiments as natural and expressive as the tones and modulations of the voice, in which the music would reflect the thought and be lost in it ; so that we should hardly perceive the notes to be different from the idea raised by the words, and should feel them only by the tumultuous violence and divine impulse of the ideas upon the mind. Any per-

son conversant with the classic poets, sees instantly that this passionate power of music I speak of, was perfectly understood and practised by the antients ; that the muses of the Greeks always sung, and their song was the echo of the subject, which swelled their poetry into enthusiasm and rapture. An enquiry into the nature and merits of the ancient music, and a comparison thereof with modern composition, by a person of poetic genius and an admirer of harmony, who is free from the shackles of practice, aided by the countenance of a few men of rank, of elevated and true taste, would probably lay the present half-Gothic mode of music in ruins, like those towers of whose little laboured ornaments it is an exact picture, and restore the Grecian taste of harmony once more, to the delight and wonder of mankind. Undoubtedly there is not a fiddler from Naples to Lapland  
who



DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 57

who would not join to oppose an improvement that would put the sacred lyre into the hands of men of genius ; but as such a revolution cannot be expected, till a musical Vida, and a Leo X. to patronize him, appear in the world, I can only recal you to your own natural feelings of harmony, and observe to you, that its emotions are not found in the laboured, fantastic, and surprizing compositions that form the modern stile of music ; but you meet them in some few pieces that are the growth of wild unvitiated taste, in the swelling sounds that wrap us in imaginary grandeur ; in those plaintive notes that make us in love with woe ; in the tones that utter the lover's sighs, and fluctuate the breast with gentle pain ; in the noble strokes that coil up the courage and fury of the soul, or that lull it in confused visions of joy : in short, in those  
affecting



affecting strains that find their way to the  
recesses of the heart ;

Untwisting all the chains that tie  
The hidden soul of harmony.

MILTON.

While we are making this slight survey of the fine arts, let us observe their relation. You see the ease and propriety which forms the elegance of action, appear again in the beauty of writing, and return anew in painting and statuary ; and all the charming sensations they raise awake also in music. Architecture has nothing to do with the passions, but you meet in it the grandeur and simplicity that run through the other sciences.

The human genius, with the best assistance, and the finest examples, breaks forth but slowly, and the greatest men have but gradually acquired a just taste, and chaste, simple conceptions of beauty.

At

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 59

At first the human mind sees but weakly and confusedly, and requires an excess of colouring to catch its attention ; in this state it prefers extravagance and rant to justness, a gross false wit to the engaging light of nature, and the shewy rich and glaring to the fine and amiable. This is the childhood of taste ; but as the human genius strengthens and refines, it is disgusted with the false and mis-shapen deceptions that pleased it, and rests with pleasure on elegant simplicity, on pictures of easy beauty and unaffected grandeur. In an enlightened age when the taste of particular persons does not rise above the puerile, then we may pronounce, that nature has formed them without indulgence, and that they are but ordinary weeds of her production.

Having cast an eye on good taste down through its effects, what remains is to go  
up

up to the sources of it in the mind, and to attempt to discover the springs of universal beauty.

Personal elegance, in which taste assumes the most conspicuous and fair appearance, confuses us in our enquiries after it, by the quickness and variety of its changes, as well as by a complication that is not easily unravelled. I defined it to be the image and reflection of a great and beautiful soul ; let us now endeavour to bring into distinct view this internal grandeur and beauty, and explicate the fine composition they form ; in short, let us clearly answer this puzzling question, What is the elegance we so much admire, and what are the sources of its attractions ?

The first and most respectable part that enters into the composition of elegance,  
is

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 61

is the lofty consciousness of worth or virtue, which sustains an habitual decency, and becoming pride.

The second and most pleasing part, is a display of good-nature approaching to affection, of gentle affability, and, in general of the pleasing passions. It seems difficult to reconcile these two parts, and in fact it is so ; but when they unite, then they appear like a reserved and virgin kindness, that may be won, but must be courted with delicacy.

The third part of elegance is the appearance of a polished and tranquil habit of mind, that softens the actions and emotions, and gives a covert prospect of innocence and undisturbed repose. I will treat of these separate, and first of dignity of soul.

I ob-



I observed, near the beginning of this Discourse, in answer to an objection you made, that the mind has always a taste for truth, for gratitude, for generosity, and greatness of soul : these, which are peculiarly called *sentiments*, stamp upon the human spirit a dignity and worth not to be found in any other animated being. However great and surprising the most glorious objects in nature be, the heaving ocean, the moon that guides it and casts a softened lustre over the night, the starry firmament, or the sun itself ; yet their beauty and grandeur instantly appear of an inferior kind, beyond all comparison, to this of the soul of man. These sentiments are united under the general name of virtue ; and such are the embellishments they diffuse over the mind, that Plato, a very polite philosopher, says finely, “ If Virtue was to appear in a visible shape, all men would be enamoured of her.”

A mind.



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE 63.

A mind devoid of truth is a frightful wreck ; it is like a great city in ruins, whose mouldering towers just bring to the imagination the mirth and life that once were there, and is now no more. Truth is the genius of taste, and makes the difference between false and simple beauty in wit, in writing, and throughout the fine arts.

Generosity covers almost all other defects, and raises a blaze around them in which they disappear and are lost : like sovereign beauty, it makes a short cut to our affections ; it wins our hearts without resistance or delay, and unites all the world to favour and support its designs.

Grandeur of soul, fortitude, and a resolution that haughtily struggles with despair, and will neither yield to, nor make terms with, misfortunes ; which  
through

through every situation, reposes a noble confidence in itself, and has an immoveable view to future glory and honour, astonishes with admiration and delight. We, as it were, lean forward with surprize and trembling joy to behold the human soul collecting its strength, and asserting a right to superior fates. When you leave man out of your account, and view the whole visible creation beside you, you see several traces of grandeur and unspeakable power, and the intermixture of a rich scenery of beauty ; yet still the whole appears to be but a solemn absurdity, and to have a littleness and insignificancy. But when you restore man to prospect, and put him at the head of it, endued with the principles of genius and an immortal soul ; when you give him a passion for truth, boundless views that spread along through eternity,

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 65

and a fortitude that struggles with fate, and yields not to misfortunes, then the skies, the ocean, and earth, take the stamp of worth and dignity from the noble inhabitant whose purposes they serve.

A mind fraught with the virtues is the natural soil of elegance. Unaffected truth, generosity, and grandeur of soul for ever please and charm : even when they break from the common forms, and appear wild and unmethodized by education, they are still beautiful, like the uncultivated flowery shrubs planted by the hand of nature in the wilderness. Who sees the headlong and irregular ardor of Telemachus in his friendships, or feelings of distress, that does not admire him ? Every body of true taste sees that they are pure politeness of heart, and accepts of them as such, like bullion, though they want the usual impression of the mode. On the

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contrary, as soon as we discover that outward elegance which is formed by the mode, to want truth, generosity, or grandeur of soul, it instantly sinks in our esteem like counterfeit coin, and we express a reluctant disappointment, like that of the lover in the epigram, who became enamoured with the lady's voice and the softness of her hand in the dark, but was cured of his passion as soon as he had light to view her.

Let us now pass to the most pleasing part of elegance, an habitual display of the kind and gentle passions.

We are naturally inclined to love those who bear an affection to us; from whence it is that politeness always insinuates a regard to others, and an attention to please. The assiduous prevention of our wishes, and that yielding sweetness



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 67

ness which complaisance seems to put on for our sakes, are never assumed in vain.

Affability in persons of elevated rank to their inferiors, never fails to win the hearts of the crowd. Cæsar was possessed of extraordinary grandeur of soul, and it was of use to him in extricating him out of difficulties, and in forming vast designs; but if you would discover the charms by which he engaged the affections of the Roman People, and won the empire of the world, you will find them in the beautiful, humane, and gentle portrait drawn of him by Sallust.

The desire of being agreeable, finds out the art of being so without study or labour. Rusticks who fall in love, grow unusually polite and engaging. This new charm, that has altered their natures, and suddenly endued them with the



powers of pleasing, is nothing more than an enlivened attention to please, that has taken possession of their minds, and tinctured their actions. We ought not to wonder that love is thus enchanting : it is but the natural address of the passion ; but politeness, which is an habitual disguise, borrows the flattering form of affection, and becomes agreeable only by the appearance of kindness.

In short, complaisance gives an agreeableness to the whole person, and creates a beauty, that nature gave not to the features ; it submits, it promises, it applauds in the countenance ; the heart lays itself in smiles at your feet, and a voice that is indulgent and tender, is always heard with pleasure.

The last constituent part of elegance is the picture of a tranquil soul, that appears

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE, 69

pears in softening the actions and emotions, and exhibits a retired prospect of happiness and innocence.

A calm of mind that is seen in graceful easy action, and in the enfeeblement of our passions, gives us an idea of the golden age, when human nature, adorned with innocence, and the peace that attends it, reposed in the arms of content. This serene prospect of human nature always pleases us; and although it be visionary in this world, and we cannot arrive at it, yet it is the point in imagination we have finally in view, in all the pursuits of life, and the native home for which we do not cease to languish.

It is the sentiment of tranquility that beautifies pastoral poetry. The images of calm and happy quiet that appear in shaded groves, in silent vales and flum-

bers, by falling streams, invite the poet to indulge his genius in rural scenes. The music that lulls and composes the mind, at the same time enchants it. The hue of this beautiful ease, cast over the human actions and emotions, forms a very delightful part of elegance, and gives the other constituent parts an appearance of nature and truth: for in a tranquil state of mind there can be no room for the malevolent passions; and the disinterested views of men in such a state, are generous and elevated. From the combination of these fine parts arise the enchantments of elegance; but the two last are oftener found together, and then they form Politeness.

When we take a view of the separate parts that constitute personal elegance, we immediately know the seeds that are proper to be cherished in the infant mind,

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## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 71

to bring forth the beauteous production. The virtues should be cultivated early with sacred care. Good-nature, modesty, affability, and a kind concern for others, should be brought out of the shade; and an easy unconstrained dominion acquired by habit over the passions. A mind thus finely prepared, is capable of the highest lustre of elegance; which is afterwards attained with as little labour as our first language, by only associating with graceful people of different characters, from whom an habitual gracefulness will be acquired, that will bear the natural unaffected stamp of our own minds: in short, it will be our own character and genius stripped of its native rudeness, and enriched with beauty and attraction.

Nature, that bestows her favours without respect of persons, often denies to the great the capacity of distinguished



elegance, and flings it away in obscure villages. You sometimes see it at a country fair spread an amiableness over a sun-burnt girl, like the light of the moon through a mist; and such, madam, is the necessity of habitual elegance acquired by education and converse, that if even you were born in that low class, you could be no more than the fairest damsel at the may-pole, and the object of the hope and jealousy of a few rustics.

People are rendered totally incapable of elegance by the want of good-nature, and the other gentle passions; by the want of modesty and sensibility; and by a want of that noble pride which arises from a consciousness of lofty and generous sentiments. The absence of these native charms is generally supplied by a brisk stupidity, an impudence unconscious of defect, a cast of malice, and  
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## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 73

an uncommon tendency to ridicule ; as if nature had given these her step-children an instinctive intelligence, that they can rise out of contempt only by the depression of others. For the same reason it is, that persons of true and finished taste seldom affect ridicule, because they are conscious of their own superior merit. Pride is the cause of ridicule in the one, as it is of candour in the other ; but the effects differ, as the studied pride of poverty does from the negligent grandeur of riches. You will see nothing more common in the world than for people, who by stupidity and insensibility are incapable of the graces, commence wits on the strength of the *petite* talents of mimicry, and the brisk tartness that ill-nature never fails to supply.

A pleasing conception of grandeur or beauty is the source of all the delight

light we find in the visible objects of nature, or in the fine arts. But if you ask me what makes visible grandeur and beauty please, I must answer you, that I know not. We are only certain, that the taste of the beautiful and sublime is uniform and universal in the human breast; that they are distinguished with different degrees of clearness, which mark out the different degrees of taste. Just and perfect taste conceives beautiful and great objects with strength and truth, as a liquid mirror reflects the skies, the trees, and banks, in their proportions and colours: but genius does something more than a mirror; for the mimic ideas of the mind, in several instances, catch a morning freshness and lustre from the imagination, which did not come from the external objects. Since the cause of that pleasure we receive from our ideas of the beautiful and the sublime, is so extremely obscure,

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 75

obscure, give me leave to furnish you with a consistent idea of their origin, by way of Fable.

The soul, before its union with the body in which it now dwells, inhabited a world exactly like this we live in, but as much superior to its most charming scenes, as a rich summer's prospect to the waste of winter. I will not attempt to paint to you the joys of its happy inhabitants, because we must suppose them vastly superior to all expression and experience. We must further suppose, that in the banishment of souls into this our world, the actual ideas of their former pleasures are lost, and their former appetites enfeebled and distracted by the pressure of misery and want; but when the mind is relieved from care, then it meets with numberless traces, and familiar deceptions, that strike the labouring imagination with  
the

the glimmering ideas of pleasures that cannot be recollected. These images through nature, that warm the mind, give us the idea of Beauty; and the mind that feels them most distinctly, and raises them in others with the most vivacity by description or imitation, has the best taste. This fiction helps us to approach to the nature of good taste, because it accounts for the rapture, the clearness, and universal approbation of beauty; and at the same time for the obscurity of the cause: but whether the soul's prepossessions be the faint traces of a former existence, or the infant appetites of future enjoyment, or the caprice of lunatic nature, cannot be determined by weak and short-sighted reason.

The fiction indeed only removes the difficulties back to a former world, but does not explain the origin of the pleasures



## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 77

fures that attend the ideas of grandeur and beauty. Let us see then whether those ideas themselves do not by some circumstances reveal the nature of the pleasures they bring along with them.

When we see instances of immense power from which we apprehend no immediate danger, we are struck with a calm awe, with surprize and suspense. The mind reviews images of grandeur with still amazement: it recoils upon itself, and feels in sentiment this question: "Who is the author of this?" The pleasure then we receive from visible images of grandeur, is formed by a sudden emotion of curiosity, of still awe, and wonder; and we find the union of these passions to be but little distant from devotion. It is with regret I must confess, that our ideas of beauty appear to be wholly



wholly instinctive, and lye not within the reach of human discovery.

I imagine you were desirous before now to ask me, how it comes to pass, since every body has a sense of elegance, and admires the great and beautiful, that so few persons of distinguished elegance or taste are to be met with in the world?

Many people have been of opinion, that a fine taste, where it exists, is born with men, and can no more be acquired than the sensible taste or smell; but others, observing the vast influence of education in forming the taste, and that in some nations and ages it seems wholly extinguished, and shines forth in others with distinguished splendor, have rather attributed it to judgment modelled by habit and study. Now, madam, I will answer you by reconciling these two opinions,

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 79

nions, which have divided the truth between them, and seem to vary only for want of a little explanation.

A taste for the beautiful and the great is universal, which appears from the uniformity thereof in the most different ages and nations. What was graceful, agreeable, and sublime in Greece and Rome are so at this day, in all nations who have risen above the darkness of barbarity : but this natural taste is communicated to different persons with such different degrees of light and clearness, that of two persons who have passed through the same course of education, the one shall remain for ever stupid, or not rise above the ordinary level, while his companion shall shine with distinguished lustre ; and this shall happen, though the more stupid has been the more laborious and attentive. You see some people struggling

struggling painfully to comprehend very obvious truths, and others, without any labour, glance through the most remote consequences, like lightning through a path that can hardly be traced.

Persons of this character see the beauties of nature with life and warmth, and paint them forcibly without effort, as the morning sun does the scenes he rises upon. A genuine dunce, whose taste has been improved with judgment; shall see the beauties of nature, and hover round them; but his descriptions and judgments shall plainly confess the obscurity and imperfection of his natural taste: however, I must observe, that it seldom happens that dunces are not perverted in their education, for the same reason that people who see badly are most apt to go astray in the twilight.

After

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 81

After night-fall, we have admired the planet Venus; the beauty and vivacity of her lustre, the immense distance from which we thought she twinkled upon us, and the silence of the night, all concurred to strike us with an agreeable amazement. But she shone in distinguished beauty without giving sufficient light to direct our steps, or to shew us the objects around us: we must have the full moon, or the glories of the sun to illumine and direct us. Thus an inferior degree of genius for ever exhibits a fine but imperfect view of the beautiful, the elegant, and sublime; but they are its strongest lights that are requisite to bestow a clear and just taste. In the crowd of mankind, taste appears faintly, and seems to vanish at times, like the same planet Venus, when she has just raised her orient beams to mariners above the

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waves,



waves, which are now descried, and now-lost, through the swelling billows.

Though the light which perceives elegance, beauty, and the sublime, be universal, yet the degree of it which puts them in our possession, and forms genius or personal gracefulness, is the endowment of few, and is not so clear even in men of the greatest parts, but it is obscured and oppressed by barbarity and habit. The idea of supreme beauty that has appeared in the world in the sunshine of taste, has in dark ages been totally lost; and in its recess, it left inanimate and cold the imagination of poets, painters, and statuaries.

We know not the bounds of taste, because we are unacquainted with the extent and boundaries of the human genius. The mind in ignorance is like a sleeping  
giant;

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 83

giant; it has immense capacities, without the power of using them. By listening to the lessons of Socrates, men grew heroes, philosophers, and legislators; for he, of all mankind, seemed to have discovered the short and lightsome path to the faculties of the mind. To give you an instance of the human capacity, that comes more immediately within your notice, what graces, what sentiments have been transplanted into the motion of a minuet, which a savage has no conception of! We know not to what degree of rapture harmony is capable of being carried, nor what hidden powers may be in yet unexperienced beauties of the imagination, whose objects are in scenes and in worlds we are strangers to. Children who die young, have no conception of the sentiment of personal beauty. We are ignorant whether there be not passions in the soul, that have hitherto remained

unawaked and undiscovered for want of objects to rouse them : we feel plainly, that some such are gently agitated and moved by certain notes of music. In reality, we know not but the taste and capacity of beauty and grandeur in the soul, may extend as far beyond all we actually perceive, as this whole world exceeds the sphere of a cockle or an oyster.

Let us now consider by what means taste is usually depraved and lost in a nation. I observed before, that this natural light is not so clear in the greatest men, but it may lie oppressed by barbarity. When people of mean parts, and of pride without genius, get into elevated stations, they want a taste for simple grandeur, and mistake for it what is uncommonly glaring and extraordinary ; whence proceeds false wit of every kind, a gaudy richness in dress, an oppressive

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 85

pressive load of ornament in building, and a grandeur overstrained and puerile universally. I must observe, that people of bad taste and little genius almost always lay a great stress on trivial matters, and are ostentatious and exact in singularities, or in a decorum in trifles. When people of mean parts appear in high stations, and at the head of the fashionable world, they cannot fail to introduce a false embroidered habit of mind : people of nearly the same genius who make up the croud, will admire and follow them ; and at length solitary taste, adorned only by noble simplicity, will be lost in the general example.

Also when a nation is much corrupted ; when avarice and a love of gain have seized upon the hearts of men ; when the nobles ignominiously bend their necks to corruption and bribery, or enter into the



base mysteries of gaming ; then decency, elevated principles, and greatness of soul expire ; and all that remains is a comedy or puppet-show of elegance, in which the dancing-master and peer are upon a level, and the mind is understood to have no part in the drama of politeness, or else to act under a mean disguise of virtues which it is not possessed of.

Upon putting together the whole of our reflections, you see two different natures laying claim to the human race, and dragging it different ways. You see a necessity that arises from our situation and circumstances, bending us down into unworthy misery and sordid baseness ; and you see, when we can escape from the insulting tyranny of our fate, a generous nature that lay stupified and oppressed, begin to awake and charm us with prospects of beauty and glory. This divine genius  
gazes

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 87

gazes in rapture at the beauteous and elevating scenes of nature. The beauties of nature charm it like a mother's bosom, and the objects which have the plain marks of immense power and grandeur, raise in it a still, an inquisitive, and trembling delight : but it often throws over the objects of its attention colours finer than those of nature, and opens a Paradise that exists no where but in its own creations. The bright and peaceful scenes of Arcadia, and the lovely descriptions of pastoral poetry, never existed on earth, no more than Pope's shepherds or the river gods of Windsor forest : it is all but a charming illusion, which the mind first paints with celestial colours, and then languishes for. Knight-errantry is another kind of delusion, which though it be fictitious in fact, yet is true in sentiment. I believe there are few people who in their youth, before they be corrupted

rupted by the commerce of the world, are not knight-errants and princesses in their hearts. The soul, in a beauteous ecstasy, communicates a flame to words which they had not ; and poetry, by its quick transitions, bold figures, lively images, and the variety of efforts to paint the latent rapture, bears witness, that the confused ideas of the mind are still infinitely superior, and beyond the reach of all description. It is this divine spirit that breathes in noble sentiments, that charms in elegance, that stamps upon marble or canvas the figures of gods and heroes, that inspires them with an air above humanity, and leads the soul through the enchanting meanders of music in a waking vision, through which it cannot break to discover the objects that charm it.

How shall we venture to trace the ob-  
ject

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 89

ject of this surprising beauty, peculiar to genius, which evidently does not come to the mind from the senses : it is not conveyed in sound, for we feel the sounds of music charm us by gently agitating and swelling the passions, and setting some passions afloat, for which we have no name, and knew not till they were awaked in the mind by harmony. This beauty does not arrive at the mind by the ideas of vision, though it be moved by them ; for it evidently bestows on the mimic representations and images the mind makes of the objects of sense, an enchanting loveliness that never existed in those objects. Where shall the soul find this amazing beauty, whose very shadow, glimmering upon the imagination, opens unspeakable raptures in it, and distracts it with languishing pleasure ? What are those stranger sentiments that lie in wait in the soul, which  
music



music calls forth ? What is the obscure but unavoidable value or merit of virtue ? or who is the law-maker in the mind who gives it a worth and dignity beyond all estimation, and punishes the breach of it with conscious terror and despair ? What is it in objects of immeasurable power and grandeur, that we look for with still amazement and awful delight ? But I find, madam, we have been insensibly led into subjects too abstruse and severe ; I must not put the graces with whom we have been conversing to flight, and draw the serious air of meditation over that countenance where the smiles naturally dwell.

I have, in consequence of your permission, put together such thoughts as occurred to me on good taste. If I have leisure hereafter, I will dispose of them with more regularity, and add any new observation

## DISCOURSE ON TASTE. 91

observation that I may make. Before I finish, I must in justice make my acknowledgements of the assistance I received. I took notice, at the beginning, that Rollin's Observations on Taste gave occasion to this discourse. Sir Harry Beaumont's polished dialogue on beauty, called Crito, was of service to me; and I have availed myself of the writings and sentiments of the ancients, particularly of the poets and statuaries of Greece, which was the native and original country of the graces and fine arts. But I should be very unjust, if I did not make my chief acknowledgments where they are more peculiarly due. If your modesty will not suffer me to draw that picture from which I borrowed my ideas of elegance, I am bound, at least in honesty, to disclaim every merit but that of copying from a bright original.

F I N I S.



